

Crossroads: Episode 37

The Potluck Project: Overcoming Division through Food and Fellowship

The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith

Welcome to the Cathedral's podcast, Crossroads. We explore the intersection of faith and the world in thought provoking bimonthly episodes, featuring guests from around the world who are seeking to live faithfully in the public square. This is a safe space for tough questions around faith, politics, science, technology, and our responsibilities as citizens. Please join us as we search for a better way forward.

Welcome to Crossroads. Today I'm excited to be in conversation with the Reverend Terry Kylo, the Executive Director of Paths to Understanding. Terry and his organization are undertaking a very interesting project called The Potluck Project, a way of bringing people together across many differences to grow in relationship while gathering at the table for good food and fellowship. So, Terry, thank you for being with us and being part of this podcast.

I was really excited to learn about this project that you all are undertaking. It sounds to me a great way to make something old new again in a really powerful way. So you're starting this potluck project, and as anyone who's hung around the church for any length of time knows, a potluck supper is about as old as Christianity itself.

And you're trying to do these potluck suppers in a unique way. That's building community at a time when we need it most. Tell us about what you're doing.

The Rev. Terry Kylo

Thank you, Randy, so much for having me on. And, you know, I grew up in a town of 300 people. We had potlucks all the time, and we even sometimes had potlucks between the Methodists and the Catholics and the Lutherans. But at those potlucks, I just experienced everybody's best dishes, experienced a whole kind of community with people I didn't always get to eat with.

And those memories are really powerful for me. About ten years ago, I left parish ministry serving, I was serving an Episcopal church at the time to try to counter anti-Muslim bigotry. And I did work all across Washington State and some across the country. And what I began to recognize is how lonely and divided we are, how isolated groups are from one another, and that over the last 60 years, as Robert Putnam has said, you know, we

have gone downward in terms of our social fabric and also our sense of trust in each other.

And what I realized out doing that work is that when people got to meet a Muslim, or they got to meet a member of the Sikh community or a Buddhist or a Jewish person, that really was what made the difference. Our messaging, the way we engaged with people from the stage was very important. But what really changed their heart was just meeting someone and realizing that there's a human connection there.

And so as I did that work, I began to meet lots of different religious leaders, and I began to ask three questions of them. What's happening to our society? And they were all concerned about the economic inequality, the lack of cooperation in our politics, the reduction of trust and connection between people and between groups. And then I asked them a third question, which was, well, what do we do about it?

What does your tradition suggest as a strategy? And as I began to ask that question, I heard from people, literally atheist or Zoroastrian, and all of them said something like, we need to eat and share stories with each other. We need to do something good for the community together. We need to find ways to show honor to each other in public.

And that got me thinking about the Gospels in a whole different way. Jesus himself engaged in a in a time of incredible division where the Empire, as you talked about in your Pentecost sermon and the Empire's values were really setting people against each other. And we're trying to portray that power over others was the only kind of power that mattered.

And I got to thinking about the gospels really differently. I realized that Jesus, in fact, brought people together for what biblical scholars would call table fellowship. And he got in the most trouble, not only for theological statements, but he got in trouble for who he was eating with and associating with. And I began to realize, well, man, you know, Jesus had all these different groups.

And one of the ways that the Empire kept its power was by keeping people in different groups pitted against each other, keeping them isolated from each other. And I realized that when Jesus was doing table fellowship and all these small villages, and he was being accused of eating with sinners and tax collectors and eating with Samaritans, and having all kinds of people from different cultures and traditions associated with him, that he was

actually engaged in a strategy to help the people in his day see each other as human beings again.

The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith

He uses that language so often to all throughout, whether it's his parables, talking about the wedding feasts or describing what the kingdom of God is like, or even, of course, the Last Supper or gathering for food and drink in the Gospels is a very important thing. So yeah, it's a holy thing to do is and I was really fortunate when I was in Richmond that Bethel Harbor, the synagogue, one of the synagogues in Richmond, was literally next door to the church. And we had a wonderful relationship between the two communities.

The Rev. Terry Kylo

Yeah.

The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith

And every year we'd get together to have conversations and lectures about some common theme between our two faiths, like the role of women in Christianity historically, or the role of women in Judaism historically. And then we'd share a meal and, it's completely life giving and changed the whole dynamic of the relationship between the two communities. So I hear you, I think it's really exciting.

The Rev. Terry Kylo

Well, you know, since we've been human, we've gathered together within our own in-group to form community and to deepen ties. But we've also gathered with other groups. We've gathered together with people that are different from us because human beings survive by cooperation. You know, that's how we've gotten to this point in our history, is that we've cooperated with each other.

It also, you know, it got me thinking more about the origins of the Abrahamic tradition, talking to a lot of rabbis who pointed out to me that in Genesis 12, when God calls Abraham, God says that Abraham is to be a blessing, or that through Abraham there God would bless all the misspoken of the world. And that word *paca* is kind of the word for tribe or clan.

We sometimes translated as nation in our scripture, but really, it's a cultural group which would have its own way of eating food, its own way of housing, language, and also religion. And so the Abrahamic tradition is itself an attempt to say, yes, it's good for you, Abraham, to create an in-group, because we all need an in-group. But I want you to remember that

I've made other in groups, and my purpose in calling you is to be a blessing to all the people of the world.

And then even in revelation, we've got the great feast at the recreation of the world, where all the people of the world come together. And so this notion of of a potluck, of everyone bringing their best is really woven in throughout our entire scripture.

The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith

So talk to us about how you envision these working. You've got some great toolkits that you're I have one in front of me here that sort of lays out how these can be done. Of course, when you hear a potluck, you think about church supper.

The Rev. Terry Kylo

Sure.

The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith

But they don't have to be church groups, do they? They can be private households or whatever.

The Rev. Terry Kylo

That's right. So I'm from an organization that's done interfaith work for like 70 years. The problem is that interfaith work right now by itself isn't enough, you know? So we really need to expand our imagination about who we might invite to a potluck like this. So the toolkit, has like different questions that you can be asked around tables.

It has a lot of suggestions for how to market it, how to invite people. And we're especially encouraging people to do two things. Number one, to start small, do some meals within your own community and help people reestablish some strength in terms of listening and in speaking their own story. Number two, begin to invite people of other communities and not just religious communities, but is there a veteran's group that meets down the road?

Is there a, a philosophy group that meets at a bookstore? Is there some quilting groups in town or a book group in town? Is there a social club that meets, or a service club that meets a think more broadly about who we could relate to by thinking about who's around us. And so sometimes just go to chat group and type in what groups are in the area and then begin to invite them.

And then our toolkit is designed to help you create an event where people can, for the first time, maybe in a long time, have a conversation about a real human kind of experiences with no politics, no policy, and no debate. So people get a little break from the culture war and the political war, and they get to see each other as human beings.

And so the toolkit is really intended to help churches, mosques, temples, non-profits, to begin to create some of these kinds of experiences because the reality is, Randy, worse, we've been so divided for so long that many people are so anxious about coming together. They need a really low threshold, easy first experience to begin to connect with their neighbors.

The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith

Absolutely. It's interesting. So tell us a story, though. I want you to tell us about the questions and how the dinner works. But first you tell us a story where you've seen it be profound. You know, where you've seen a relationship blossom. Because I know you've been doing this for a long time.

The Rev. Terry Kylo

Yeah. You know, I got two little stories. One is a man named Jim who just was so completely isolated from everyone, and he was part of a small Unitarian group here in town. Unitarian fellowship. And the leaders saw how isolated he was and got him connected to us. And he went from the kind of person that it would take him a minute to respond to a question like, literally a minute.

You would ask him a question, and a minute would go by before he could speak to. Now he is like registering people at the event. And he spoke in public at one of them. But even something greater than that, there was at one of our events this year, an older Pentecostal Hispanic pastor sat at a table with a queer Puerto Rican female Methodist pastor.

Normally, if they had met out in the wild, they would have started thinking poorly of each other. But they started talking about the questions in the potluck and one of the key ones is, what was your favorite food growing up? Who made that food and why is that important to you and these two people connected over this question?

They began to go out to coffee and to lunch, and they realized that there are things that the Spanish speaking community near here has need for some services and some connections, and they're going to work on that together, despite the fact that their field theology is very different, and probably their political ideologies are very different. And

that's the kind of partnership that can be created when we go out of our way and create the space for these kinds of human connections.

The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith

That's really the Holy Spirit working in the.

The Rev. Terry Kylo

Absolutely.

The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith

So talk about the questions. Talk about how one of these goes, because I think you have you know, you're not just telling people to come together and bring a dish and have dinner. I mean, you've really got a whole program here for how people can start off slowly and then build and then have some really profound conversations. But give us an overview of what a good evening would look like.

The Rev. Terry Kylo

Yeah. So, you know, first of all, you want to set up, you know, round tables typically if you can have between, you know, 4 to 6 people around a table, you generally want to have folk that have a little bit of training, being a table facilitator. And we do have a little table facilitation guide in there. And, and we'll have more resources like that come in.

And then what we usually do is we have three questions and it's one of the great ones there is about the food. And we usually ask people to identify what groups they're part of, what their name is and that sort of thing. And then we do the food question and then we take a break. We encourage them as their table is finishing up that first set of questions, to go get some food.

And there's a couple of reasons why we want to do it that way. One is that it gives people a little break, so that they're not getting too intense in a conversation because just like someone who's been starving for food, you don't want to feed them a steak dinner. Someone who's starving for relationship. You need to really pace that experience for them.

And plus they have small talk on the way to the food. They help each other, you know. Oh, here's the serving a spoon or oh, I'll get a napkin for you. And there's little bits of human kindness that start to get woven in. And then we ask them another set of questions, which again, are, are really, you know, fairly simple, but they end with this question.

What are your hopes and dreams for our community? And that's where they can begin to sense without getting into politics and policy so much that sort of what really matters to that person, and that begins to set the stage for the other kinds of partnerships that may be able to come to exist. And then we encourage that people don't just do one potluck project event that we ask them to consider doing a sustained number of them.

So we actually have seven different question sets available for people to use. And we have even more questions than that if people need. And so what begins to happen is at the end of the event, you say, well, who else do we know what other groups could be invited here? And so then, well, can you reach out to them and can we go have coffee with their with the leader of that nonprofit or with that group, the leader of that group.

And all of a sudden you start to see a movement start to happen. But we do encourage people to start small, start within their congregations, start with just a couple, because we can't fix this loneliness and isolation all at once. This is going to have to be a sustained effort over a long period of time. And just as Jesus as he brought people together, the Empire realized how powerful that was.

The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith

Oh yeah.

The Rev. Terry Kylo

And I would argue that's part of the reason why they killed him, because they realized that if people start seeing each other as human beings, the ways of the empire are not going to last very long, because once we start to know each other, we really start to care about each other.

The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith

Compassion is stronger than fear.

The Rev. Terry Kylo

Absolutely.

The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith

Do you find that there is some hesitancy on the part of other groups to say yes, and to come and take part, or is there a little? I imagine there must be a little, maybe suspicion or worry, or am I being set up for something or, you know, that kind of a thing?

The Rev. Terry Kylo

Yeah. So look, we have a tremendous amount of distrust and there's so many different reasons for that. You know, it's not just loneliness and isolation. It's the historical trauma. There's trauma that people have with religious organizations, including the church. There's racism. There's all kinds of reasons why people are distrustful. And so, in a way, we think about this as the beginning of a trust building process. This isn't about putting on an event. This is about building trust.

The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith

You know, in the United States, there are a lot of churches that are purple. You know, they're yes, equally folks on the left and equally folks on the right. And that's always a tricky road to walk. Can you use this potluck approach within a community itself, or is it really intended to work from community to community?

The Rev. Terry Kylo

Well, I think that really, we encourage it to always begin within each community. So a church that's purple, I mean, let's have these conversations with each other because many times people come to church on Sunday morning and they don't know each other very well, and they start to see each other as human beings. They start to see some of the deep values that folk are caring about.

You know, when I was countering anti-Muslim bigotry, I always tried to listen for the thing people are loving underneath their fear, you know, because what we fear is usually based on what we really care about. There's a threat to what we care about. And I would try to honor what it is that they were trying to care about there.

And so I really think in this country, we've put too much of our identity into our political or ideological identity. And what we're trying to do with the potluck project is to remind people that folk have other identities to bring as well, and that we don't always have to be in this kind of like ideological warfare between Republicans and Democrats and conservatives and liberals.

And I think also what I like to say to people is that we know that cultural differences, plus social distance can lead to distrust. And in this moment, there are some people that want to do away with cultural difference. And to do that, they have to destroy our democracy. But I believe that actually, if we decrease our social distance from each other, that we can not only preserve our democracy, we can make it stronger and we can begin to trust each other again.

And I think Jesus was offering something very similar. He was decreasing the social distance between people in his day. And that was not only part of his theology, that was part of his strategy to help restore human beings to each other in his own day. And I think we can do the same now.

The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith

That's a work of reconciliation that's so important. So, Terry, how are these communities supposed to handle it when, say, you come together for one of these and someone gets agitated or argumentative in a way that's unhealthy, does this project prepare people for that?

The Rev. Terry Kylo

Well, you know, we haven't actually found too much of that happening yet. We do encourage the leaders who bring people together, be on the lookout and kind of wander around the room and ensure that folk are staying within the guidelines of the evening, you know, no politics, no policy. We're not trying to convert or change anyone else's mind.

We're trying to speak for ourselves. But there certainly will be occasions across the country where someone's going to break that and someone's going to begin to, instead of using eye statements to start talking about someone else and when that happens, the leaders of the communities that are pulling folk together need to invite that person out, you know, into a separate room and have some conversation with that person.

And there are times when that's going to happen because everyone has been so heated up. Our fear is so high that that is going to happen. But, you know, during my work to counter anti-Muslim bigotry, we often had to have security. And but I would always ask the security to people to invite the person to stay because I would like to talk to them afterward.

And a lot of times I would go and speak to these people who were being very agitated in these public spaces. And a lot of times they would hug me at the end because what I was listening for again was, what is it that they're loving? I didn't call them a racist. I didn't call them a terrible person.

I wanted to hear what it was that they were genuinely, you know, caring about. And so a lot of times, you know, people who have that kind of agitation, if they're listened to, will actually be able to reenter the group and often apologize even for getting over their skis with their anxiety and with their behavior.

But obviously we have a lot. One of the challenges of the potluck project is because there's been so much trauma in our society between each other. Sometimes that trauma comes out, and as leaders, we have to be prepared to ask someone to go out into the narthex or into the kitchen for a few minutes and, and be able to reflect on how their behavior was kind of outside the guidelines.

The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith

And that can happen, quite frankly, in any, any kind of a parish supper, any time. Really.

The Rev. Terry Kylo

Absolutely.

The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith

You're right about that. And one of the things I love about what this project is doing, is it, it's so similar to some of the work we're trying to do with our better way. Yeah, a better way to talk to each other. A better way to listen to each other. A better way to build relationship ups. You know, you're you all are really doing it in this grassroots way that is so powerful and really appreciative for the work that you're doing.

The Rev. Terry Kylo

You know, Randy, I think the thing that we see in bridge building work across the country is that folk are trying to get people started at too high a level at step number five, instead of step number one. What we see when we gather people together is that they're so full of fear, engaging with anyone different from them.

But once they have this kind of like really simple kind of low threshold experience, then they become prepared for other forms of civil dialog around either theological or public issues. And so what we're trying to do is to say, look, let's give people a doable first step, an achievable first step on the journey toward trust building and connection.

Because without that kind of connection, we don't have a society. You know, I've owned a house for 20 years and I've never been told by someone, hey, I love your foundation, but if my foundation wasn't there, my house would be listing and would be falling apart and the foundation of our society. We have all collectively neglected these group to group relationships and these person to person relationships for at least 60 years.

And it's going to take long, slow, consistent work. But we can repair that foundation and build a country that is more generous and kind and compassionate and also respectful of difference.

The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith

Amen. So if people want to find out more about what you're doing, where should they go? Terry.

The Rev. Terry Kylo

Yeah, if they would just go to the Paths to Understanding board. And there you can see a Get Involved tab, and we have a potluck project page there. And you just sign up at the bottom and you'll get a password. And you'll be able to download the toolkit for free. We have webinars about three times a year where we share what we're learning, and we're also happy to consult with groups with churches, mosques, temples, non-profits about how to do this kind of work.

We're happy to do that. We're doing this work nationally. I was talking to some leaders yesterday in, you know, broad range of organizations, and we all feel so strongly that we need to begin to restore our sense of connection and trust to each other in this country so that we can begin to tackle the issues that we have.

So if they go to pass to understanding dawg, get involved and the potluck page there, they will see a way to sign up and they can download the toolkit and everything else for free. And they can get Ahold of us, through our website as well.

The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith

Oh that's fantastic. And I'm looking at the toolkit right now and it's really, really well done. You know, this is such basic stuff in some ways, Terry. And yet, as you said, it is confronting it and dealing with it is some of the most important things we can do in our culture right now. Because even when we disagree, even when we're on radically different sides of an issue, what's the old saying?

It's very hard to dislike someone when you know their story. That's right. And I do think that's true. And we can see each other's common humanity. I think that goes a long way to making our society such a better place. And what could be more important for a Christian community or Jewish community or a Muslim community to be doing, then to be undertaking that kind of work of reconciliation.

So I really want to thank you for coming to be with us on the podcast. And I'm going to keep you in my prayers, and I hope that this project grows very quickly.

The Rev. Terry Kylo

Randy, thank you so much for your leadership and for this time today. And, you know, the thing that people come away with these things with is how did we forget how to do this? Yeah. When did we forget how to be together, and this is this is part of us as human beings. This is nothing new. This this toolkit really isn't even necessary, except for to remind people that this is part of who we are and a part of who God created us to be.

The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith

Thank you. Thank you very much, Terry.

The Rev. Terry Kylo

Thank you, Randy.

The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith

Everywhere you look in the Cathedral, someone's looking back at you from a stained glass window to a needlepoint kneeler to a stone carving. They're icons of biblical and American history that have been placed in the Cathedral, because there was something about each of them that was worth remembering or emulating. What do these Cathedral icons tell us today? What might they tell us to point us towards a better way?

For our next episode, tune in for an inspiring conversation on this creative topic with our Canon Missioner, Leonard Hamlin, and our Chief Public Affairs Officer, Kevin Eckstrom. Thank you for listening to Crossroads. And until next time, many blessings.

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